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POPULISM AND THE NEW OLIGARCHY

The repugnance with which the words 'populism' and 'populist' are uttered these days is a familiar feature of the political scene. The former Italian prime minister Mario Monti appeals to people to avoid 'a return to the past and populism'. The French president, François Hollande, warns against 'dangerous populist excesses' ('as in Italy'), while his finance minister, Pierre Moscovici, in his turn, expresses the fear that one-sided austerity programmes may 'nourish a social crisis that leads to populism'. Other epithets used to describe populism include 'aggressive', 'virulent', 'uncivilized'. No one knows why this creature of the 'saloon bar', 'incited by swaggering ham actors', is always 'ridden'—but even the impeccable German Free Democrats have 'decided to ride the tiger of populism'. If the Austrian Social Democrats head 'back to the roots' it is in a principled way, not that of 'a cheap, vote-getting populism'. Populism is always an 'anti-systemic' threat, not less so in its newest, 'digital' variant.[1] And so on.

Amid this anxious unanimity, one thing stands out: the concept of populism is regarded as self-evident, as if we all know what is being referred to. The truth is that political scientists have been debating its meaning for at least fifty years. In a famous 1967 conference on the question at the London School of Economics, the keynote lecture by the US historian Richard Hofstadter was already entitled 'Everyone Is Talking About Populism, but No One Can Define It'. The discussion was unintentionally comic at times. While Margaret Canovan listed seven forms of populism, Peter Wiles enumerated no fewer than twenty-four defining characteristics, but proceeded in the second half of his text to the exceptions—the

populist movements that did not exhibit these features.[2] In short, as the label comes to be applied to the most diverse movements, the phenomenon itself has become increasingly elusive. It would be easier to list what has *not* been defined as populist. At the same time, as we shall see, the social category from which it has been derived historically, 'the people', has all but vanished from political discourse. This essay will offer an explanatory hypothesis for the trajectories of both 'populism' and 'the people'; but first we need to trace something of their history.

The populist galaxy

That history began, according to Wiles, as far back as the seventeenth century, with the Levellers and the Diggers. It includes the Chartists, the US Populist Party, the Narodniks and Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia, Gandhi in India, Sinn Féin in Ireland, the Iron Guard in Romania, Atatürk's Kemalism in Turkey, the Alberta Social Credit Party, Tommy Douglas's Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan, the Institutional Revolutionary Party under Cárdenas in Mexico, the Acción Popular of Belaúnde Terry in Peru, Poujadism in France and Julius Nyerere's socialism in Africa. Not to mention Nasserism in Egypt, Peronism in Argentina, the Social Democratic Party and the Brazilian Labour Party in Brazil, the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) in the Dominican Republic, the National Liberation Party in Costa Rica, Acción Democrática in Venezuela, Castroism in Cuba and military reformists over half the world as imitators of Nasserism. The list continues

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[1] Monti: *La Stampa*, 4 April 2013; Hollande: *La Stampa*, 28 March 2013; Moscovici: *Daily Telegraph*, 7 March 2013. The phrase 'swaggering ham actors' appears in Fulvio Tessitore, *La Repubblica*, 13 March 2013, and the 'saloon-bar opposition' in *The Independent*, 20 May 2013. 'Virulent' is a recurrent adjective—for example, in Claudio Tito, *La Repubblica*, 21 March 2013. On the German FDP and the populist tiger, see Daniele Mastrogiacomo, *La Repubblica*, 21 April 2013, and for Austrian Social Democracy's non-populist return to its 'roots', see Laura Rudas in *Der Spiegel*, 14 July 2011. For 'digital populism' (Massimo Giannini), see *La Repubblica*, 9 March 2013.

[2] An account of the LSE conference (19–21 May 1967) can be found in Isaiah Berlin *et al.*, 'To Define Populism', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 3, no. 2, April 1968, pp. 137–80. The contributions were collected in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, London 1969. See also Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, London 1981 and Peter Wiles, 'A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism', in Ionescu and Gellner, eds, *Populism*, pp. 163–79.

into the late twentieth century, taking in the Northern League in Italy, the 'ethno-populisms' that flourished in the ruins of Yugoslavia and Silvio Berlusconi, whose strategy has been defined as 'tele-populist'.[3] Mussolini's fascism, with all its variants and imitations, has naturally been included in this galaxy. Also *de jure* enrolled are Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement and the various versions of 'anti-politics', from Germany's Pirates to Geert Wilders's Freedom Party in Holland and the Occupy movement, for, ultimately, '99 per cent against the 1 per cent' is as good a summary as any other. At the far end of the spectrum, however, the Tea Party too has been defined as populist.

As can be inferred from this *catalogue à la Prévert*, searching for a definition that would fit all these cases is a fool's errand. As long ago as the 1980s Rafael Quintero and Ian Roxborough made the obvious suggestion of deleting the term from the social sciences.[4] But this is not a decision that can be taken on an individual basis: one may throw the term out the window, but others will continue to use and disseminate it. The alternative is precisely to regard its vagueness and self-contradictoriness as its defining characteristic. This was the route taken by Pierre-André Taguieff, for whom populism is a political style which 'can shape diverse symbolic materials and be fixed in a multiplicity of ideological positions, assuming the political colour of its place of reception'. The same line is taken by Yves Surel who, in an essay on Berlusconi, argues that populism does not represent a coherent trend, but corresponds to 'a dimension of the discursive and normative register adopted by political actors'. Populism, writes Ernesto Laclau, 'is not a fixed constellation but a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses', 'floating signifiers' that convey different meanings in different historical-political

[3] See Wiles, 'A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine', p. 178; Richard Löwenthal, 'The Points of the Compass', *Encounter*, September 1960, pp. 24–31; Torcuato di Tella, cited by Ludovico Incisa in his entry on 'Populismo' in Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci and Gianfranco Pasquino, *Dizionario di politico*, Turin 1983, pp. 832–8; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London 2005; Paolo Flores d'Arcais, *Il ventennio populista. Da Craxi a Berlusconi (passando per D'Alema?)*, Rome 2006. On the notion of 'tele-populism', see Paul Taggart, *Populism*, Birmingham 2000, pp. 73–88. Guy Hermet offers a definition of 'ethno-populism' in *Les populismes dans le monde. Une histoire sociologique XIX–XX siècle*, Paris 2001, pp. 117–24.

[4] Rafael Quintero, *El mito del populismo en Ecuador*, Quito 1980; Ian Roxborough, 'Unity and Diversity in Latin American History', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1984, pp. 1–26.

conjunctures.[5] The idea that populism works when regarded as a certain kind of rhetoric, applied in different ways in different situations, is appealing—but in truth, merely registers its polysemy and returns it to sender. However, there is a third possible line of attack. It is this: populism is not a self-definition. No one defines themselves as populist; it is an epithet pinned on you by your political enemies. In its most brutal form, 'populist' is simply an insult; in a more cultivated form, a term of disparagement. But if no one defines themselves as populist, then the term populism defines those who use it rather than those who are branded with it. As such, it is above all a useful hermeneutic tool for identifying and characterizing those political parties that accuse their opponents of populism.

For and against

This approach has the further, not insignificant advantage of making it possible to introduce a temporal dimension into the discussion. For populism has not always been deployed as it is today, and has not always been a definition of others. Until the end of the Second World War, many people and parties gladly defined themselves as populist, which for them was equivalent to being popular. Theirs was the 'people's party': when it was founded in the USA, the People's Party was also called the Populist Party. Its platform, adopted in Omaha in 1892, will have a familiar ring:

> We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized . . . The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labour impoverished.[6]

Through to the middle of the twentieth century, then, many would have been proud to be called populist. The battle-lines were clear: those who stood on the side of the people and those who were against them; those who wished to see the plebs become the people and those who believed that the people were nothing but plebs. This followed in the tracks of an

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[5] Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'illusion populiste, de l'archaïque au médiatique*, Paris 2002, p. 80; Yves Surel, 'Berlusconi, leader populiste?', in Oliver Ihl, Janine Chêne, Eric Vial and Ghislain Wartelot, eds, *La tentation populiste au cœur de l'Europe*, Paris 2003, pp. 113–29; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London and New York 2005, p. 176.
[6] See, for example, historymatters.gmu.edu for the full text of the Omaha platform.

age-old polarity, in which not only populists but the people themselves were an object of contempt and insults, a tradition dating at least to the sixth century BC when, according to Herodotus, the Persian Megabyzus opposed those who wished 'to call the people to power' thus:

> There is nothing so void of understanding, nothing so full of wantonness, as the unwieldy rabble. It were folly not to be borne, for men, while seeking to escape the wantonness of a tyrant, to give themselves up to the wantonness of a rude unbridled mob. The tyrant, in all his doings, at least knows what he is about, but a mob is altogether devoid of knowledge; for how should there be any knowledge in a rabble, untaught, and with no natural sense of what is right and fit? It rushes wildly into state affairs with all the fury of a stream swollen in the winter, and confuses everything.[7]

In these few lines, we find already synthesized all the stereotypes that would constitute the rhetorical figure of the people in the millennia to come: it is good for nothing, untaught, wanton, wild, undiscerning and impetuous. The 'rabble' had a long history ahead of it. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Hippolyte Taine sprinkled the pages of his *Origines de la France contemporaine* (1876–94) with descriptions of the 'riff-raff': 'In every important insurrection there are similar evil-doers and vagabonds, enemies of the law, savage, prowling desperados, who, like wolves, roam about wherever they scent a prey. It is they who serve as the directors and executioners of public or private malice.'[8]

By contrast, defenders and advocates of the people were very late in making themselves heard, if only because those who could write usually formed part of the *optimates*, the self-styled 'best men' of their time, either by descent or co-option. The followers of Thomas Müntzer in sixteenth-century Germany, and the Levellers and Diggers of seventeenth-century revolutionary England, were the first to vindicate their cause as that of the 'people of God'. In the eighteenth century, it was the turn of the authors of the French *Encyclopédie*. In the entry on *Peuple*, the Chevalier de Jaucourt waxed ironic: 'In France the *people* were once regarded as the most useful, valuable and, as a result, respectable part of the nation'. Then, however, 'the class of men making up the people became ever more limited': traders, financiers, literati and

[7] Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book III, chapter 81, trans. George Rawlinson, London 1997, pp. 265–6.
[8] Quoted in Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 31–2.

lawyers gradually pulled apart from the people, so that only peasants and workmen remained—to whose industriousness, honesty and frugality Jaucourt went on to write an extended panegyric, before arriving at his real political objective: 'if these supposed politicians, these wonderful geniuses full of humanity were to travel a little, they would see that industry is never as active as in countries where the "little people" are comfortable'. And he concluded: 'Put a lot of money in the hands of the people and a commensurate sum, which no one will resent, will inevitably flow back from it into the public treasury. But extorting from them the money they have earned by their work and industry means depriving the state of its health and resources.'

With the *Encyclopédie* an equation was fixed: a positive opinion of the people is the precondition for engaging in a battle for the people; in its turn, however, this opinion is achieved through struggle. Hence appreciation of the people becomes both a tool of political struggle and its stake. Those who are against the people must project an unsavoury image of them, in the manner of Megabyzus or Taine. Those who are 'democratic' must disseminate a positive, even idyllic image. The division is clear, and is set out in the extraordinary volume written by Jules Michelet two years before the revolutionary tidal wave that shook Europe in 1848. It was entitled *Le Peuple* and offered a romantic paean to its subject. For the oligarchs the people were brutal, vulgar and insensate; *Le Peuple* inveighs against those well-born writers who deign to leave their salons only to describe the tiny minority of delinquents that permits them to reinforce the police. For Michelet, by contrast, the people are generous, self-sacrificing and overflowing with humanity. But the real point is revealed at the end of his long introduction: 'Be assured, France will never bear any name but one in the mind of Europe; that inexpiable name, which is also its true and eternal one—the Revolution.'[9]

Representations

With Michelet and Romanticism, 'the personality of the people' made its appearance. We should recall that the theory of the subject was then in full bloom: Hegel's World Spirit as subject, Comte and Spencer's society-subject (society as a living organism), humanity as subject, Herder's nation as subject, Marx's class-subject; the people as subject. If

[9] Jules Michelet, *The People*, trans. G. H. Smith, New York 1846, p. 27.

the people are a subject that possesses a personality, they will also have a psychology. The late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of studies whose form and tenor were exemplified by Gustave Le Bon's epoch-making work, *La psychologie des foules* (1894), in large part plagiarized from *La folla delinquente* (1891) by the Italian Scipio Sighele. The concern here was the criminal aspect of the crowd. Anxiety about the 'dangerous classes', fear of rebellion, despair at the disruption of the established order were elevated to the status of empirical science.

Le Bon's crowd has much in common with Megabyzus's people: bereft of judgement, impetuous, ignorant and stupid. But these characteristics were now medicalized ('it is necessary to bear in mind certain recent physiological discoveries'): wildness is explained as 'disinhibition', in which the crowd 'gives way to instincts'. Stupidity is refined into 'suggestibility'—the man in the crowd is 'as if hypnotized' and 'will undertake the accomplishment of certain acts with irresistible impetuosity'.[10] In its turn, suggestibility triggers another 'medical' syndrome in the crowd: contagion.

If the crowd has a personality, a psychology, a 'mind', an 'imagination', 'sentiments' and a 'morality' (as indicated by Le Bon's chapter titles), then it also has a gender. In the nineteenth century, no one doubted that the crowd was a female and behaved accordingly:

> In many descriptions of women written in the nineties, females embodied all that was threatening, debasing and inferior. Like the insane, they revelled in violence; like children, they were incessantly buffeted by instincts; like barbarians, their appetite for blood and sexuality was insatiable.[11]

The comparison with women and children cannot but bring to mind one of the most famous passages in Western political literature: Book One of the *Politics*, where Aristotle establishes a homology in the relations between master and slave, man and woman, father and offspring, and thus fixes the chain master–husband–father, on the one hand, and that of slave–woman–child, on the other. In the feminization of the crowd,

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[10] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, New Brunswick, NJ 1995, pp. 88, 51, 49.

[11] Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth Century France*, New Haven 1981, p. 60; quoted in Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 34–5.

what matters is not so much the cheap psychology applied to it as the underlying appeal to the inexorability of subordination.

These ideas had a numerous progeny. Crowds would become 'masses' and contagion would become 'collective psychosis'. In 1921, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Sigmund Freud expounded ideas very similar to those of Le Bon. Following the First World War, however, another empirical science could be employed to characterize the crowd: anthropology was added to physiology and psychology. In the twentieth century the crowd—or mass—was credited with a new attribute: primitivism. In William McDougall's *The Group Mind* (1920), the simple unorganized crowd is 'excessively emotional, impulsive, violent, fickle, inconsistent, irresolute and extreme in action'—'its behaviour is like that of an unruly child or an untutored passionate savage' and in the worst cases, 'it is like that of a wild beast'; once again, the Aristotelian chain, with the child and slave replaced by the savage.[12] In Freud's understanding, 'when individuals come together in a group all their individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal and destructive instincts, which lie dormant in individuals as relics of a primitive epoch, are stirred up'; and thus, 'identification of the group mind with the mind of primitive people' is fully justified.[13]

As a final item in this overview of images of the people, we might note the stock representation of radio and television audiences. This 'virtual crowd' shares at least some of the characteristics of its classical predecessor: Goebbels's listeners and the viewers of US evangelical television are above all 'suggestible', dupes in a regime of what Mariuccia Salvati calls 'instant opinion'—as opposed to the 'deferred opinion', on which representative democracy was based—for which the terms 'tele-populism' and then 'cyber-populism' have been coined.[14]

Whether in its virtuous or its demonic incarnation, the people had a 'long nineteenth century'. Up to and including the Second World War, 'people'

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[12] William McDougall, *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology, With Some Attempt to Apply Them to the Interpretation of National Life and Character* (1920), Cambridge 1927, p. 45.

[13] Sigmund Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', in Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Harmondsworth 1985, p. 106.

[14] See Mariuccia Salvati, 'Populismo, linguaggi, comportamenti: Crisi o trasformazioni della democrazia?', *Parolechiave (nuova serie di 'Problemi del socialismo')*, June 2010, no. 43, p. 210.

and 'popular' remained central categories on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, a red thread links the opening of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen—'The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly'—the French Popular Front of 1936, and Article 1 of the 1947 Italian Constitution: 'Sovereignty belongs to the people.'[15] In Italy, even Don Luigi Sturzo's Partito Popolare (1919) formed part of this current: symptomatically, it was precisely via the category of 'the people' that Catholics attempted to re-enter the national political arena after the First World War.

Up until the Cold War, these categories were also central in US history. 'In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party had no trouble embracing economic populism', notes the political economist Robert Reich. In the 1936 presidential campaign, 'Roosevelt warned against the "economic royalists" who had impressed the whole of society into service: "The hours men and women worked, the wages they received, the conditions of their labour—these had passed beyond the control of the people and were imposed by this new industrial dictatorship."'[16] In his final campaign speech at Madison Square Garden, Roosevelt proclaimed: 'They say that those on relief are not merely jobless—that they are worthless'; but 'you and I will continue to refuse to accept that estimate of our unemployed fellow Americans'. More ambiguously, perhaps, he noted, 'we now know that Government by organized money is just as dangerous as Government by organized mob.'[17]

'Freedom' and its other

From the late 1940s onwards, the discursive register underwent a radical change. It is striking to note how the category of 'the people' loses its centrality in the political battle. Sinking stars on Sunset Boulevard used to embark on a tour of Japan; something similar happens to political categories—when they are devalued, they are relegated to the Third World. In the post-war period, at least until the 1970s, 'the people' remained a powerful designation exclusively in the context of 'liberation

[15] It was no coincidence that General de Gaulle referred in 1958 to the categories of the period that gave him his legitimacy—i.e. the Second World War—when in the preamble to his constitution he reaffirmed: 'The French people solemnly proclaim their attachment to the Rights of Man.'

[16] Reich's article can be found on www.robertreich.org, 7 October 2011.

[17] Roosevelt's speech can be found at millercenter.org/president/speeches/.

fronts', whether popular or national, appealing to a multi-class coalition. Their disappearance from the political radar in the metropolitan world is attributable not to the dematerialization of the people itself—just as, after 1989, the occlusion of the word 'class' did not abolish actually existing social classes—but to the Cold War and the rise of a new paradigm of political orthodoxy. This was a paradigm one of whose capstones, together with 'totalitarianism', was the term 'the people', and it was definitively consolidated in the theory of the 'opposite extremes'.

Political terms, as Pierre Bourdieu insisted, should be regarded not merely as tools but as stakes in the political struggle. When in the eighteenth century Voltaire and Diderot appropriated light and clarity—defining themselves as 'enlightened' and casting their opponents into the obscurity of 'the dark ages'—they had already won the contest. In a minor way, the same thing occurred in the 1970s, when the *nouveaux philosophes* appropriated the 'new' and expelled their own opponents into the 'old', the past. (On a yet smaller scale, the Mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, attempts a similar operation in his talk of 'scrapping' the current leadership of his Democratic Party, relegating it to the role of an old jalopy.) During the Cold War, the West appropriated the word 'freedom': the station broadcasting propaganda to the East was called Radio Free Europe, and the most widely disseminated text by a Soviet defector was Victor Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* (1946). The West defined itself as the 'free world', while for its part the Soviet bloc had appropriated the words 'people' and 'popular', as in the People's Democracies of Eastern Europe. As a result, the epithet became ever more unmentionable in the West, because 'popular' referred to what lay beyond the Iron Curtain. It is sufficient to think of the suspicion generated in the US by Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile. In the West, the people were pushed to the margins of political discourse. What Roosevelt had called the 'American people' was translated into the 'middle class'.

Today, although its message is very similar to that of the nineteenth-century populists, not even the Occupy movement invokes the people. Indeed it is striking how rarely the political actors defined as populist actually use the term. There are many books on Berlusconi's populism, but one very seldom hears him talk about 'the people'; nor does it seem to me that Beppe Grillo employs the word more frequently. Here we come to the nub of the problem: how do political figures who never refer to the people come to be defined as populist? Naturally,

while the term was marginalized, a cultural attitude that had taken root over millennia—contempt for the plebs and their vulgar political proclivities—did not disappear. Nor did the contradiction between the interests of 'the little people' and 'the fat people', to use the expression of the mediæval communes. What came about was a fundamental negative revaluation of the concept of 'populism', as bequeathed by nineteenth-century political movements and the philosophy of the New Deal. How did this take place?

Forging a new link

The central thesis of this study is that systematic use of the term populism is a post-war phenomenon which develops in exact proportion to the disuse of the term 'the people': the more peripheral the people in political discourse, the more central populism becomes. Library databases provide striking support for this claim. Here I have chosen the University of California library network because, unlike many other institutions, its database includes journal articles, which do not figure in other catalogues on an initial search. The results (Table 1, below) are notable, to say the least. From 1920 onwards, the UC catalogues contain more than 6,200 entries on 'populism', but over half of these pertain to the last thirteen years, and all but 53 titles date from 1950 onwards (Figure 1). In the post-war period, each decade churns out approximately double the quantity of the previous decade. There is an exponential progression, such that the output of the last three years is almost equal to

TABLE 1: *Titles on 'populism' and 'populism and fascism', 1920–2013*

Decade published	*1920s*	*1930s*	*1940s*	*1950s*	*1960s*	*1970s*	*1980s*	*1990s*	*2000s*	*2010s*
Populism	11	28	14	40	167	370	557	1,336	2,801	1,046
Populism and fascism	-	2	-	2	5	7	17	44	103	30

Source: MELVYL, University of California libraries catalogue, accessed via worldcat.org; figures gross, for books and articles, including duplicates from the various campuses.

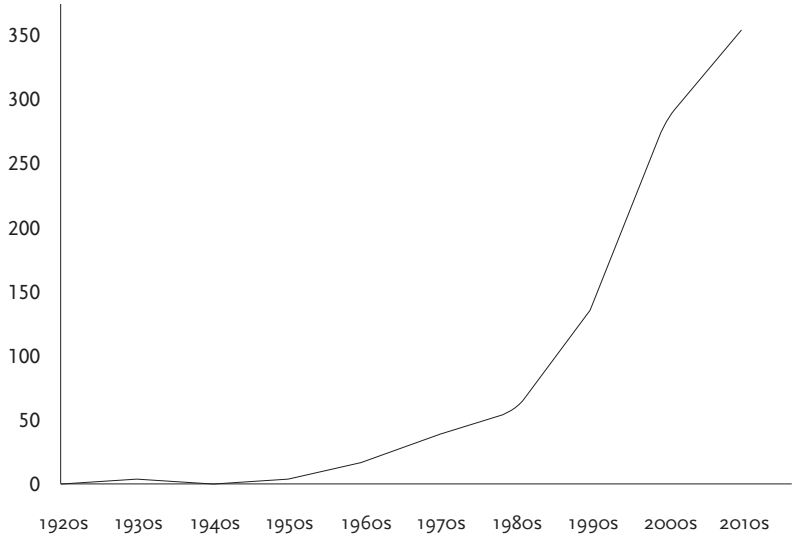
that of the seventy years from 1920 to 1989. The exponential diffusion of discourse on populism is unquestionably a post-war phenomenon, and has continued at the same accelerating pace since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Just as striking is the (less voluminous) data on the terms 'fascism and populism' combined (Figure 2). The first occurrence is a collection of writings in honour of an economist, Wesley Clair Mitchell (the title appears twice, in two different editions). In the 1950s, we find a single article, William Tucker's 'Ezra Pound, Fascism and Populism' in the *Journal of Politics*, likewise recorded twice. In the 1960s, by contrast, the combination of the two terms is commonplace, and titles multiply. What had occurred in the interim?

In the 1950s, a major exercise in historical revisionism was undertaken in the United States by the so-called Cold War liberals, who began to describe nineteenth-century American populism as a proto-fascist movement and, over time, fixed the pejorative denotation of populism (the one accepted today), disseminating it first in the quality press, then in the mass press, and finally in the jargon of political life. The bibliography of this operation is enormous. Arthur Schlesinger may be regarded as its precursor, with *The Vital Centre: The Politics of Freedom* in 1949, in the early days of the Cold War. Here, the theory that fascism and communism are opposed but similar, inasmuch as both are 'totalitarian', was expounded for the first time. This idea was developed by liberal historians who advanced the theses that the 1950s radical right was populist and, vice versa, that nineteenth-century populism contained fascist elements. Paradigmatic of the first was a book edited by Daniel Bell in 1955, *The Radical Right*, derived from a 1954 Columbia University seminar on McCarthyism, of which a populist interpretation was offered.[18] Alongside Bell's, the key essays in *The Radical Right* were by Seymour Martin Lipset and Richard Hofstadter.

If not the main artisan of populist revisionism, Hofstadter was certainly its emblematic figure, above all with his celebrated *The Age of Reform* (1955), where he states at the outset: 'I find that I have been critical of the Populist-Progressive tradition—more so than I would have been had I been writing such a study fifteen years ago.'[19] Hofstadter presents

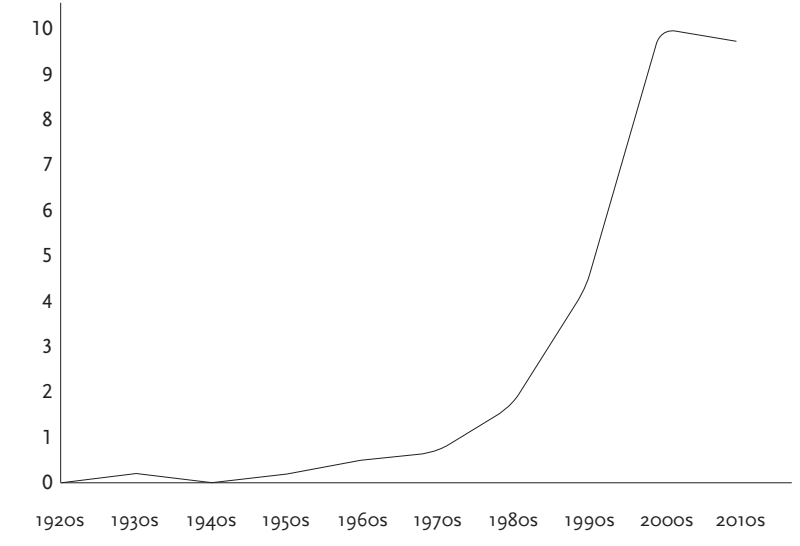
[18] Michael Paul Rogin demolished this operation in *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Spectre*, Cambridge, MA 1967.
[19] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, New York 1955, p. 12.

FIGURE 1. *Average annual titles on populism, 1920–2013*



Source: MELVYL.

FIGURE 2. *Average annual titles on populism and fascism, 1920–2013*



Source: MELVYL.

himself as an 'internal critic', counter-balancing the 'complacency' of liberals. He reviews nineteenth-century developments, but with a view to the present, for he considers the People's Party of the 1890s 'merely a heightened expression, at a particular moment of time, of a kind of popular impulse that is endemic in American political culture'. Then comes the indictment: 'I believe that Populist thinking has survived in our own time, partly as an undercurrent of provincial resentments, popular and "democratic" rebelliousness and suspiciousness, and nativism.' This is not quite the plebs, but we are very close to the riotousness of the *hoi polloi*.

The move that allows Hofstadter to associate the progressivist populism of the nineteenth century with the Cold War right involves an inversion of perspectives: 'The utopia of the Populists was in the past, not the future.' Hence it was not only a utopia—and thus unrealizable—but a reactionary one, although Hofstadter concedes that 'they did not express themselves in such terms'.[20] The second move consists in reducing the class struggle to a conspiracy theory: if the vast majority have to suffer, it is because of a conspiracy by the 1 per cent. Hence a charge that will pursue all those accused of populism down to the present—that of oversimplifying reality: 'The problems that faced the Populists assumed a delusive simplicity: the victory over injustice, the solution for all social ills, was concentrated in the crusade against a single, relatively small but immensely strong interest, the money power.'[21]

The final, most vicious assault is launched when Hofstadter labels nineteenth-century populists anti-Semites: 'it was chiefly Populist writers who expressed that identification of the Jew with the usurer', which was 'the central theme of the American anti-Semitism of the age'.[22] This is a charge that continues to hang over those accused of populism today. Let us be clear: given the vagueness and indeterminacy of the label 'populism', and given the heterogeneity of the movements and parties it is applied to, it is obvious that among movements charged with populism there are some that are genuinely anti-Semitic (but the

[20] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, pp. 4–5, 62. Here I follow Norman Pollack, 'Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of "The Age of Reform"', *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 26, no. 4, November 1960, pp. 478–500.
[21] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p. 65.
[22] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p. 78.

converse is also true). In fact, Hofstadter's accusation is based on very limited documentary evidence. In the 1896 campaign, the pro-populist presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, William Jennings Bryan, stated:

> Our opponents have sometimes tried to make it appear that we are attacking a race when we denounce the financial policy advocated by the Rothschilds. But we are not; we are as much opposed to the financial policy of J. Pierpont Morgan as we are to the financial policy of the Rothschilds. We are not attacking a race; we are attacking greed and avarice, which know neither race nor religion. I do not know of any class of our people, who by reason of their history, can better sympathize with the struggling masses in this campaign than can the Hebrew race.[23]

But what matters is that any movement accused of populism would henceforth be tainted with the suspicion of anti-Semitism. Hofstadter is certainly not alone in rendering populism 'fascist' and fascism 'populist'.[24] But he is the prime example of it, and it was under his influence that this image of populism was established as the new orthodoxy in the international academy; not least through the 1967 LSE conference on populism, discussed above, of which Hofstadter was one of the chief promoters. His view of populism has been hegemonic in political science ever since.[25]

The unnamed abomination

Thus, by the end of the 1960s populism had already acquired all the negative connotations that it retains to this day. It might be said that things were done and dusted: a populist politician is one who invokes,

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[23] Quoted in Pollack, 'Hofstadter on Populism', p. 494.

[24] See, for example, Victor C. Ferkiss, 'Populist Influences on American Fascism', *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1957, pp. 350–73.

[25] The 'heterodox' exceptions, albeit numerous, have always been in a minority—to cite but a few names, the already mentioned Michael Paul Rogin, Michael Kazin (*The Populist Persuasion*, Ithaca, NY 1995), Walter Nugent (*The Tolerant Populists*, Chicago 1963), Norman Pollack (*The Populist Response to Industrial America*, Cambridge, MA 1962), C. Vann Woodward (*Thinking Back*, Baton Rouge 1986), Ernesto Laclau (*On Populist Reason*) and, above all, Christopher Lasch, even though he had been a pupil of Hofstadter (*The New Radicalism in America*, New York 1965; *The Agony of the American Left*, New York 1966; and, in particular, *The True and Only Heaven*, New York 1991, in which Lasch seeks to rehabilitate populism).

lauds and butters up a people that is never named, but is discredited by all the negative characteristics attributed to it by an age-old tradition—a negativity that is personified in the 'populist' politicians who supposedly represent this unnamed abomination.

Above all, the new sense of populism was perfect for constructing a bridge linking communism and fascism. The importance of this Cold War tool in the panoply of politics cannot be overstated. Prior to this, the power of the dominant classes in (mainly parliamentary) bourgeois regimes had been positioned in a head-on confrontation with the 'dangerous classes'. Now it was represented as the only free, democratic order in human history, encircled and threatened on all sides, forced to defend itself against fascists and communists alike. This too was a novel construction of the Cold War: rather than feeling threatened by the fascists, the Italian and German establishments had actually helped them into office; Italian fascism enjoyed an excellent press and powerful political allies in the Anglo-American democracies of the 1930s. It was the Cold War that coined the 'free world–totalitarianism' opposition.

The new meaning of populism *à la* Hofstadter performed the role of the hyphen between the totalitarianisms to perfection. First, as a 'utopia of the past', it connected the historic threat of fascism with the looming, future menace of communism. Second, populism was deemed inherently authoritarian. Not for nothing is the plebiscite, the institution most closely associated with populism—populists are regarded as quintessential supporters of 'plebiscitary democracy'—the only one that retains a clear trace of its 'plebeian' origin (*plebs*: common people; *scitum*: decree). Populism is supposedly authoritarian because the unnamed entity underlying it—once again, the unmentionable people—is authoritarian. The people's alleged propensity for despotism is another cliché inherited from the classical tradition. For Aristotle, where the people are sovereign, they become 'despotic', and 'this sort of democracy is to other democracies what tyranny is to other forms of monarchy.'[26] It was Giambattista Vico who systematized this cycle of democracy and tyranny, the eternal return of despotism, when (a few years before the entry on 'the people' in the *Encyclopédie*) he summarized Aristotle in *The New Science*:

[26] Aristotle, 'The Politics', Book IV, 1292 a1, trans. Jonathan Barnes, in *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson, Cambridge 1996, p. 99.

> At first, people desire to throw off oppression and seek equality: witness the plebeians living in aristocracies, which eventually become democracies. Next, they strive to surpass their peers: witness the plebeians in democracies which are corrupted and become oligarchies. Finally, they seek to place themselves above the laws: witness the anarchy of uncontrolled democracies. These are in fact the worst form of tyranny, since there are as many tyrants as there are bold and dissolute persons in the cities. At this point, the plebeians become aware of their ills and as a remedy seek to save themselves under a monarchy.[27]

This thesis contains a covert implication: at bottom, democracy always harbours the seeds of a future tyranny. The new strategy of the 'two totalitarianisms' does not deny that populist aspirations correspond to a genuine desire for democracy; on the contrary, it affirms that they tend towards despotism precisely because of that. In populism (read: the people) is contained the seed of totalitarianism. The analysis of the semantic trajectory of populism clarifies what at first sight seems its insoluble aporia—and appears so to countless political scientists—namely, that there are 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' populisms, 'reactionary' and 'progressive' populisms, or that one and the same populism can be right-wing in some respects and left-wing in others, reactionary and progressive. In reality, the new semantic domain of populism was constructed precisely in order to connect these opposed categories. Its political utility consists in its making possible the equation of movements seemingly at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Symmetrical extremes

Why, however, has the Cold War definition of populism not only survived the collapse of the USSR but continued its exponential surge over the past quarter-century? The contention here is that the discourse of the 'twin totalitarianisms' has been carried over into the 'theory of extremes'. According to this notion, political legitimacy properly rests on the exclusion of the extremes of the spectrum. Just as in some statistical averages, outlying values are excluded because they are regarded as 'abnormal', so the rules of democracy apply only within a 'non-extremist' space. Today, the idea of a symmetrical extremism seems self-evident. But such was not the case in 1970, when the then Prefect of Milan, Libero

[27] Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, Book One, section II, axiom 95, trans. David Marsh, London 1999, p. 109.

Mazza, delivered a report on 'The Public Order Situation with Respect to Extra-Parliamentary Extremist Groups', in which he set out the idea of 'opposite extremes'.[28] The Left promptly demanded his resignation: at the time, it was inconceivable that political parties which had taken part in the partisan struggle, and been persecuted by fascism, should be equated with it.

But what was then unimaginable—even blasphemous for some—has become contemporary common sense. The current uses of 'populism' are grounded in the notion of the centre versus these opposite extremes. The transition from 'twin totalitarianisms' was not self-evident: Cold War liberalism posited itself as the 'vital centre', but in a world-historical sense; the opposite-extremes discourse is an operation aimed at restricting legitimate political activity to a particular zone. Today, the choice offered the electorate is no longer that between right and left, but centre-right and centre-left. The distance between the two discourses emerged in the late 1990s when Arthur Schlesinger snapped back at Clinton's increasing use of the coinage 'the vital centre', writing in *Slate* magazine:

> When I wrote the book I named *The Vital Centre* in 1949, the 'centre' I referred to was liberal democracy, as against its mortal international enemies—fascism to the right, communism to the left. I used the phrase in a global context. President Clinton is using the phrase in a domestic context. What does he mean by it? His DLC fans probably hope that he means 'middle of the road,' which they would locate somewhere closer to Ronald Reagan than Franklin D. Roosevelt. In my view, as I have said elsewhere, that middle of the road is definitely not the vital centre. It is the dead centre.[29]

Sixteen years on, the 'dead centre' is not only alive and kicking, but wields quasi-absolute power. Defining the centre depends, of course, on the definitions of right and left, which are relative and shift along the political axis over time. At the start of the 1970s, Nixon proposed health-care legislation that was rejected by the Democrats because it was too 'right-wing'; however, it was a good deal more 'left-wing' than the package implemented in 2010 by Obama, which was contested because it was too 'left-wing'. In the interim the axis of politics had shifted rightwards,

[28] For the 'Mazza Report', see the website of the Italian Interior Ministry: www.prefettura.it.
[29] *Slate*, 10 January 1997.

so that the centre was situated where once the right had been. The same shift occurred in Europe: in 2003, the German SPD's Agenda 2010 was manifestly to the right of the policies implemented by Helmut Kohl; in Italy, the centre-left Democratic Party defends positions that are more 'right-wing' than those of Christian Democracy.

A new oligarchical order

As a measure of where the centre is now said to be situated, we may take the case of the 'centrist' Bill Clinton, whose followers were dubbed 'Rubin Democrats', after his Treasury Secretary, a former Vice-President of Goldman Sachs and board member of Citigroup; that is, a spokesman for the interests of big finance. That an administration very close to the most powerful bank in the world, to what Roosevelt had called 'organized money', should be regarded as 'centrist', not to say 'third way', is indicative of the intervening political shift.[30] The Rubin Democrats exemplify in graphic fashion some of the long-term trends that have emerged since 1989.

Firstly, social classes have become unmentionable, just like the people. At least at the level of discourse, political proposals are no longer anchored in the material interests of opposed social groups. Naturally, this 'disinterestedness' is an imposture: the specific interests of groups and classes are unquestionably pursued, even though they pass unnamed, in the service of the general interest—as, for example, in the goal of 'restoring the public finances'. Cameron and Osborne are pursuing policies that would once have been defined as blatantly 'pro-employer', in the name of an unattainable balanced budget. In Europe, classes have disappeared from public discourse to a greater extent than in the US, where the social character of the various electoral constituencies remains clear and the phrase 'class struggle' continues to be uttered with few inhibitions—though usually these days by Republicans; in 2011 Paul Ryan, rising star of the GOP, accused Obama of 'class warfare'. More candidly Warren Buffet, the world's fourth richest man, told a *New York Times* reporter: 'There's class warfare, all right,

[30] It also indicates the sheer impudence of Clinton's 1992 electoral campaign slogans, 'For People, for a Change' and 'Putting People First'. As the absence of the definite article makes clear, this is not a return of 'the people' but invokes a plurality of (some) individuals.

but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.'[31] One of the prizes for the winning side—and at the same time, one of the tools with which this victory is being won—is the claim to occupy the 'centre' ground.

Secondly, 'negative power'—that is, powers of prevention, surveillance and evaluation—has vastly increased. Nadia Urbinati has cited the 'pervasive power of the market' as perhaps the most influential modern negative power, due to 'its ability to claim the legitimacy to veto political decisions in the name of supposedly neutral and even natural rules'.[32] In recent years, the 'independent' central banks and the international financial institutions have significantly extended their exercise of negative power: the IMF, World Bank, WTO and European Central Bank evaluate and interdict national economic policies according to their own 'expert' priorities. The assessments of the ratings agencies, which are private entities in law, have a decisive impact on the lives of individual citizens. No Greek, Spaniard or Italian has ever elected the board of directors of Moody's; yet whether that citizen will receive treatment for a tumour, whether her daughter will be able to go to university, may be determined by their call.

Thirdly, the scope of democratic decision-making has become tightly circumscribed. Most of the government's economic, fiscal, spending, social security and social policies now elude popular choice; instead, they are shaped and ultimately imposed by the external limits of the 'negative powers'. In a second move, which we might call the imposition of internal limits through the expansion of the doctrine of the twin extremes, the only remaining choice is between a 'centre-centre-right' and a 'centre-centre-left'—that is, between two essentially identical politics. The maximum alternation to which this kind of regime aspires is that of bi-partisan coalitions, taking turns in office. In reality, today's governance—that ineffably bureaucratic neologism—is not simply bi-partisan but *tri*-partisan, the third element comprising negative external powers. Illuminating in this respect is the former governor of the German Bundesbank, Hans Tietmeyer, who in 1998 praised national

[31] Ben Stein, 'In class warfare, guess which class is winning', *New York Times*, 26 November 2006.

[32] Nadia Urbinati, 'Dalla democrazia dei partiti al plebiscite dell'audience', *Parolechiave*, no. 47, 'Politica e partiti', June 2012, pp. 12–13.

governments for preferring 'the permanent plebiscite of global markets' to the (implicitly less qualified) 'plebiscite of the ballot-box'.[33]

In sum, since the end of the Cold War an oligarchic regime has been consolidated throughout the West, in both the socio-economic and the political sense. The first has been more widely noted, as wealth distribution has become more skewed and veritable monied oligarchies have emerged.[34] In the United States in 2007, 1 per cent of the population owned 35 per cent of total wealth and the next 19 per cent owned 51 per cent, meaning that the top fifth of the population cornered 85 per cent of wealth, while the remaining four-fifths were left with a mere 15 per cent.[35] However, we are also dealing with oligarchy in a formal political sense, because increasingly the elites are not subject to the same legal regime as the rest of the population. One of Italy's leading jurists has noted that, 'lurking behind the spectre of populism is the risk of an oligarchical degeneration of constitutional democracy'.[36] Except that the degeneration is no longer a risk, it is a reality.

Already the elites submit to a much laxer tax regime. Warren Buffett (fortune valued at around $50 billion, plus or minus ten depending on stock market fluctuations) once again makes use of his immunity to reveal that he is subject to a rate of income tax less than half that imposed on his secretaries. What for ordinary citizens is a criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment, has become for the elites a civil misdemeanour, attracting fines. Thus, last December, HSBC agreed to pay a penalty of $1.92 billion for having laundered huge amounts of Mexican drug-dealers' money—a crime for which the bank's directors should have been sentenced to long prison terms. After the doctrine of the bank too big to fail, we now have the doctrine of the bank 'too big to indict'.[37] The regime is thus strictly oligarchical, because there are two laws: one for ordinary citizens, another for the powerful few.

Since the financial crisis there has been an increasing recourse to extra-representative bodies, as in Italy, which was first entrusted to a

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[33] Luciano Canfora, *Critica della retorica democratica*, Rome-Bari 2011, p. 33.
[34] Paul Krugman, 'Oligarchy, American style', *New York Times*, 4 November 2011.
[35] 'Occupy Wall Street and the rhetoric of equality', *Forbes*, 1 November 2011.
[36] Cesare Pinelli, 'La sfida populistica allo Stato costituzionale', *Parolechiave*, no. 43, June 2010, p. 154.
[37] The title of an editorial in the *New York Times*, 11 December 2012.

government of 'technocrats' and then to a committee of 'wise men'. The technocrats' impatience with the rules of democracy, which is compulsive, emerges in an interview with Monti: 'Those who govern must not allow themselves to be completely bound by parliamentarians.'[38] But this restriction is also effected by delegitimizing all criticism as 'irresponsible'—or 'populist', which has become synonymous. In short, the only responsible criticism is the one that does not criticize; the sole objection is the one that is consensual; the only alternative is endorsement. The cruellest example involves Spaniards who have been evicted from their homes and who dare to protest in front of the houses of those they wish to denounce, a form of protest called an *escrache*. These are peaceful, non-violent demonstrations by those whom the crisis has left on the streets. But notice how they are vilified. For the deputy of the ironically named Partido Popular (PP), Eva Durán, '*escraches* are like when the Nazis marked out houses', while the general secretary of the PP, María Dolores de Cospedal, has stigmatized these actions as 'sheer Nazism' and the unarmed protesters as caught in a 'totalitarian, sectarian mind set'.[39]

Populism's parabola

More generally, the slightest departure from centrist etiquette is immediately labelled thuggish and violent, in an operation of verbal terrorism that is indeed violent. At bottom, the Italian Five Star Movement is the most law-abiding and, in a way, the most moderate force of political protest in recent years: it essentially expresses itself by standing at elections, and indeed can be criticized for undue canonization of parliamentary democracy. Its demands are not 'extremist'; there is nothing 'Bolshevik' or 'fascist' about them. What is populist about wanting to nationalize a failed bank (Monte Paschi of Siena), or challenging a single European currency that is miring Italy in the most serious recession of the century? No matter: its 'populism' is a 'virus' that may prove contagious.

We have already seen that the Five Star Movement is characterized as populist despite the fact that it never pronounces the word 'people'. In fact, its electorate and audience are not particularly plebeian; those with a low level of education are significantly under-represented among them, while a small segment of Italians active on the web is over-represented.

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[38] *Der Spiegel*, 5 August 2012.

[39] *El Pais*, 5 and 13 April 2013, respectively.

In addition, the Movement is predominantly popular among the secular and does not recruit among believers.[40] In short, it does not conform to the plebeian, fideistic or credulous profile that should characterize the following of a populist politics. Nor can it be accused of 'tele-populism' and still less of 'liberal-media populism',[41] given that TV interaction is taboo for its sympathizers. But so what? Berlusconi, who is based on TV, is a populist; Grillo, who detests TV, is a populist. The ultimate humiliation. Yet the Five Star Movement has so far managed to elude the pincers of the linguistic operation 'populism' devised by Hofstadter and his co-thinkers, in that it has avoided being banished to the extreme right or left.

Here ends the parabola of 'populism', at the historical moment when the developed world is advancing into an oligarchical despotism, and the opposition between oligarchs and plebs has returned; when anti-popular policies are imposed just as the word 'people' is erased from the political lexicon, and anyone opposed to such policies is accused of 'populism'. The democlastic frenzy is such that Umberto Eco now accuses even Pericles (495–25 BC) of populism.[42] Yet one reason why more and more movements are coming to be characterized as 'populist' is that anti-popular measures are multiplying. You want health care for everyone? You are a populist. You want your pension linked to inflation? But what a bunch of populists! You want your children to go to university, without carrying a life-long burden of debt? I knew you were a populist on the quiet! Thus the oligarchy's court jesters denounce any popular demand. And even as they void democracy of any content, they accuse anyone opposed to this hollowing out of having 'authoritarian instincts', just as the unarmed victims of eviction are accused of being Nazi persecutors.

The inflated use of the term 'populism' by the *optimates* thus reveals a covert anxiety. Just as the adulterous spouse is always the one most

[40] Piergiorgio Corbetta and Elisabetta Gualmini, *Il partito di Grillo*, Bologna 2013, pp. 100, 102 and chapter 5, 'Il movimento e la rete', pp. 169–96 (especially the figure on p. 189).

[41] A curious hybrid category introduced by Guy Hermet, *Les populismes dans le monde*, p. 146.

[42] Umberto Eco, 'Figlio di etera', in 'L'almanacco del Bibliofilo 2012', entitled *La subdola arte di falsifare la storia*, ed. Mario Scognamiglio, Milan 2012; reprinted with great prominence in *La Repubblica*, 14 January 2012, under the title 'Pericle il populista'.

suspicious of their own partner, so those who eviscerate democracy are the most inclined to see threats to it everywhere. Hence all the to-do about populism betrays a sense of uneasiness, smacks of overkill. The faintest murmur of dissent is turned into an alarming sign, heralding the ominous rumble of thunder that threatens to erupt into the hushed salons of the powerful, who believe themselves safe, but still anxiously peep out from behind the curtains for any signs that the people may be stirring: 'V*ade retro vulgus!*' Or as they say these days, 'Get back in line!'

Translated by Gregory Elliott

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